N. C. MIAs:

Vietnam still a living tragedy for 28 Tar Heel families

Editor's note: *Bella English, a senior journalism major, conducted personal interviews with wives or mothers of MIAs in Goldsboro, Raleigh, Fayetteville and Dunn. In telephone interviews, she talked with numerous other MIA relatives, and with U.S. Department of Defense and Air Force officials. She also interviewed a former POW and spokesmen in the UNC Naval ROTC and the state government.*

Paul Underwood climbed the bright yellow metal ladder up to the cockpit of the sleek F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bomber. To 39-year-old Underwood, it was just another bombing run. He had already piloted 101 missions over Korea and now more than 20 over North Vietnam.

The 19-year veteran of the Air Force, he had made major, and lieutenant colonel should come soon. He was on his last tour of duty.

He settled his large frame into the narrow cockpit, adjusted the red-and-white helmet over his dark hair and glanced up at the sky. Soon he was airborn.

It was March 16, 1966.

Not long after takeoff from the Thailand base, he dived to bomb a bridge at Dienbienphu, a North Vietnamese city near the border of Laos. Suddenly antiaircraft fire erupted from the ground. The F-105 was hit. It lost altitude and crashed into a mountain.

Other U.S. pilots said they saw a parachute. But today, almost nine years after the plane crashed, the U.S. government and Underwood's family still don't know if he's alive or dead. He's listed as missing in action.

"We always have some hope, but I really don't believe anyone's alive over there," Mrs. Gloria Underwood, his wife, says. She finally decided last year that her husband wasn't coming home.

She is sitting in the living room of her white-frame home in Goldsboro. She holds a black scrapbook filled with pictures and newspaper clippings of her husband. She goes through it occasionally. "But I never go back through his letters," she says. "I try to block most of that out."

She leaves the room and returns with the jacket of an Air Force uniform. Ten medals gleam above the left pocket. "I don't even know what some of these are for," she says with a sigh. "I think one of them is a Distinguished Flying Cross." She smoothes a wrinkle in the jacket.

She and Paul had six children: Marilyn, now 25, Kathy, 22, James and Richard, 20-year-old identical twins, David, 14, and Patty. Now 9, Patty was three weeks old when her father left for Vietnam.

The children now accept the fact that their father may be dead.

Mrs. Underwood says she is not bitter at the government. "To me, the government's hands are tied, and they're doing the best they can." She says she is not the banner-waving type and hates sympathy:

"Paul was doing what he loved most of all. He only had to fly 100 missions over Korea, but he flew an extra one for a buddy who had been killed. He flew something like 23 in Vietnam. I really can't remember. I've kind of blocked that part out." Her voice breaks.

But she is bitter about Vietnam. "The whole war was a waste of time, money and lives. When I get requests for money to help rebuild South Vietnam and to take care of the kids, I get angry. Why doesn't the U.S. look after its own poor kids?"

Monthly Pay

As long as her husband is missing in action (MIA), Mrs. Underwood receives his monthly paycheck. She also receives 10 per cent interest by putting her money in savings in the U.S. Service Deposit Program. She pays no federal income taxes unless she goes to work or her husband returns.

Her situation is not unlike those of at least 27 other wives or parents in the state, all with an MIA husband or son. North Carolina—with its large Army base at Ft. Bragg, and Seymore Johnson Air Force Base at Goldsboro—has more MIAs than any other Southern state. South Carolina, for example, has 10.

Because U.S. troops pulled out of Vietnam in early 1973 and most POWs were released by the spring of that year, the Vietnam war is not headline news today. But it continues to haunt 28 Tar Heel families.

Tar Heel MIAs come from all over the state. One was reported missing in June 1973, five months after the Paris peace pact was signed. Seven have been missing since 1966, two years longer than any MIAs from WWII or Korea. A statute that previously declared MIAs dead after seven years doesn't apply to Vietnam—because Congress never declared war.

Some children of MIAs never saw their fathers. Others have dim recollections. A few Tar Heel families have had an MIA husband or son declared killed in action (KIA), but most still hope for word of their loved ones.

Nationally, the Pentagon listed 941 MIAs in Southeast Asia in late 1974. But private groups organized to determine the fate of the MIAs say there are more. Some groups pay for billboard space along highways to say that "1300 American Men Are Missing."

Whatever the exact number, the percentage of MIAs in Vietnam is lower than in World War II and the Korean conflict.

Dr. Roger E. Shields, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense, testified before the House Armed Services Committee on Nov. 19 that 1,363 MIAs and 1,100 KIAs (bodies not recovered)—a total of 2,463 men—were unaccounted for after the POWs left Vietnam. That is approximately 4.3 per cent of the total American deaths in Vietnam, compared to 33 per cent of the total MIAs and bodies unaccounted for after both WWII and Korea.

Shields said that even if North Vietnam cooperated fully with the United States, some MIA cases would not be resolved. The Paris Peace Pact has no provision to account for the more than 300 Americans who died or are listed as missing in Cambodia, China or Laos.

"If we consider...the ravages of war and passage of time..., there may still be some men for whom the other side simply cannot account, and where searches may prove fruitless," Shields said. He cited men declared missing in 1942 whose bodies were not found until 1974. Their funerals were held then. Despite such explanations from government officials, most Tar Heel families interviewed say the government isn't doing enough.

"If President Ford would stay at home instead of going to Japan and places like that, they could go over there and try to find our boys," Mrs. Myrtie Butler of Dunn says.

Mrs. Butler's eldest son, James, has been missing since March 20, 1970, when his plane was shot down near the Mekong Delta. She learned of the incident on March 24, on her return from a trip to California for her youngest son's wedding. Army personnel met her at her front door.

"Later they sent me an outline of the little ole plane Jimmy was in," she recalls. "Now how they know how the bullet went through that plane—when they said they never found the plane—I'll never understand." She shakes her head.

"Jimmy put his whole heart into flying," Mrs. Butler says. "He wanted to buy a plane and do commercial flying when he got home."

Hopes and Doubts

Mrs. Butler talks about her hopes and doubts. "Sometimes I think he'll come back, and then sometimes I think he couldn't possibly be alive after that. But I tell you, if he don't come back..." Her voice trails off.

She holds up her right arm, showing a bracelet inscribed "James E. Butler, 3-20-70." "I'm not taking it off until I hear something more about my son," she says.

Another Tar Heel mother wears a bracelet with her son's name and the date he was listed as missing. "I haven't taken it off since I put it on," Mrs. Berte Howell, 54, of Fayetteville says.

Capt. Carter Howell's plane was shot down by ground fire on March 7, 1972. The *New York Times* reported the incident three days later:

In a delayed report, the United States command said one F-4 was shot down Tuesday by ground fire while attacking the Ho Chi Minh supply trail network in southern Laos. The two crewmen are missing, the command said.

Mrs. Howell discusses the incident: "I won't accept the fact that he will never come home because they haven't searched Laos since the peace pact."

The Howells are a military family. Mrs. Howell's husband, retired Army Col. Alphonso Howell, 57, attended the Citadel in Charleston, S.C. His only other son is now a junior there.

"It's just second nature for Carter to want to go to Vietnam," Mrs. Howell says. "I'll never forget when Carter left for Okinawa. He said to his father, 'Now Daddy, don't go clean up Vietnam. Wait for me to help you out.' "

A friend of the Howells, Lt. Col. Ray Schrump, was a POW for five years in South Vietnam. He wears Carter Howell's bracelet and speaks on behalf of MIAs throughout the state.

Schrump believes most MIAs are dead but that the government should try to account for as many as possible.

"The government's apathy is overwhelming," he says. Schrump and others have asked Gov. James Holshouser to deliver a personal resolution to President Ford stating that North Carolina wants her MIAs accounted for.

Another person who wants more government action is Mrs. Susan Borden. Her husband, Capt. Murray Borden, was flying his 86th mission on the night of Oct. 13, 1966. His plane was shot down over the Ho Chi Minh trail.

On Feb. 8, 1974, nine years after he disappeared, she requested that he be declared killed in action (KIA).

Mrs. Borden, 32, now is a systems engineer for IBM in Raleigh. She explains that her husband's status change does not mean he is dead legally. By law, there must be a body to declare death. The change cleared up financial matters.

Many wives don't want their husbands declared KIA, Mrs. Borden says. "Those who are older with children and who probably won't remarry say 'Why should I have him declared dead when I can get his salary every month?' But nobody can pay for that life, even though the government tries."

She says her husband's absence ruined the best years of her life. "I prayed for Murray's death a year after the accident. There are worse things than death." No one can exist under those circumstances and remain sane, she says.

"You accept what happens, you go on, you live, and you get happy," Mrs. Borden says. "I never said 'Why me?' A lot more people have a helluva lot more to endure than me."

But the tall attractive blonde says she is bitter over what she calls the insensitivity of the state government.

North Carolina fined her for not having her husband declared dead eight years ago, she says. State officials inisisted that she pay some back taxes for the last eight years.

"Sixteen dollars for eight years. How ridiculous is that?" she asks. She refuses to pay the sum.

Rocky Mount Mother

One Rocky Mount mother is optimistic that her son will return. Mrs. Mildred Johnson, 52, describes his disappearance during a recent telephone interview.

S. Sgt. Darrell Johnson has been missing since Jan. 19, 1968, when his company encountered a large North Vietnamese force in the central highlands of South Vietnam. His platoon was left to help cover the withdrawal of allied troops. The men heard an English-speaking voice.

"As lead man, Darrell went into a ravine to investigate, and it turned out to be a North Vietnamese speaking English," Mrs. Johnson says.

A soldier who was nearby wrote Mrs. Johnson recently that Darrell had hidden behind a tree and was alive when the soldier saw him last.

Darrell Johnson was 21 when he disappeared seven years ago. He was 6 feet tall and weighed 195 pounds—"real muscular" his mother says.

As state coordinator of the League of Families, Mrs. Johnson attends annual league meetings in Washington, D.C., writes letters to congressmen and the President, organizes the sale of MIA bracelets and bumper stickers and participates in marches for MIAs.

She talked briefly with President Ford when he came to Southern Pines in September to dedicate the National Golf Hall of Fame. He told her the North Vietnamese are very hard to deal with.

"It seems we could threaten to cut off trade with Communist countries or use our economic power somehow to pressure the North Vietnamese to send us word," she says.

Hope keeps her going, Mrs. Johnson says. "It's been a long seven years, but I've felt from the start Darrell is alive."

Robert Hall, 67, of Waynesville, is also active in the MIA awareness campaign. His only child, Frederick, was reported missing on April 12, 1969, when his plane disappeared into a cloud bank during bad weather.

Through Mr. Hall's efforts, Waynesville had an MIA awareness week in the fall. The local Jaycees convinced state Jaycees to take on an MIA-awareness project.

Local chapters adopt an MIA and pay $5 a month to the League of Families. The league uses the money for various MIA projects, Hall says.

Fred Hall, a University of North Carolina graduate, is 31 years old. His wife, the former Julie Keith of Houston, Tex., is 27. They were married only three months when he was reported missing.

Despite a "long six years and a lot of discouragement," Mrs. Irene Hall, 61, still hopes her son will return. "Parents never give up hope on their children," she says.

The Halls express disappointment over the lack of government intervention.

"The Paris peace pact isn't worth the paper it's written on," Hall says. He read the entire pact and says the North Vietnamese have not adhered to it by refusing to allow search teams in their country.

"The last words Nixon said when he spoke to the League were 'I will not let you down.' Of course, those were just words," Mrs. Hall says.

It's easy to understand the feelings of the Halls and the other MIA families, since their loved ones are involved. And they have had false hopes. The U.S. government promised an active involvement in accounting for the missing men, but many people say that involvement was buried first under Watergate and now under the oil crisis and inflation. The North Vietnamese have blocked U.S. efforts to search Communist territory for clues of the MIAs. Some people say the news media are too silent on the MIA issue, for 21 newsmen are among the missing.

And as the waiting, hope, patience, despair and discouragement continue for the Tar Heel families.

Ray Schrump, the former POW, says emphatically: "If there are any MIAs alive in Vietnam, you can be sure they're counting on the American people to help them."

But now after the Jan. 27 second anniversary of the Paris peace pact, it looks more and more doubtful that they're alive.

Pentagon efforts

What is the U.S. government doing about the MIAs?

Maj. Larry Ogle, a Defense Department public affairs spokesman, explained government actions recently in a telephone interview:

"A four-party joint military team including the North and South Vietnamese, the Vietcong and the United States was set up by the Paris peace pact. Its purpose is to locate the missing and the remains of the dead whose bodies weren't found."

The North Vietnamese and Vietcong have boycotted the Saigon meetings for the past year, Ogle said. "We meet with the South Vietnamese, but so many areas are controlled by the North Vietnamese that there's not much we can do."

But American investigators have worked out a system with South Vietnamese troops. According to a United Press International report, South Vietnamese troops conduct the actual search in areas where security is poor, and U.S. team members direct activities from nearby safe areas.

Headquarters for the probe is the Joint Casualty Resolution Center at Thailand's isolated Nakhon Phanom Air Base, the U.S. military headquarters for Southeast Asia.

Last year, search teams brought the bodies of 65 persons. Five MIAs were identified positively, but word on the other 60 bodies has not been released.

On Dec. 13, the Pentagon sent a statement to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong urging the release of information on 87 other MIAs. A State Department spokesman said photos and articles in Communist publications show that there is information on the men's fate. But nothing has come of it yet.

Col. Paul Underwood of Goldsboro in front of his F-105 Thunderchief at a Thailand base in 1968, shortly before his plane was shot down.

Stories by Bella English

Insight

Support of MIA families costs government millions

Support for the MIA families across the nation costs more than $20 million a year. It amounts to $280,000 annually in North Carolina, at the very least.

Some North Carolina families fear that the government will soon declare the MIAs killed in action, partly because of the monthly paycheck each family continues to get.

But one Defense Department official denies this, saying money is not the main issue. "The men were in service to their country," Col Lawrence Robson said in a recent telephone interview. "We have to make every effort to provide their pay to their families.

"And when you consider that the government has a military budget in the billions, it's really a small amount that we pay the families," Robson said.

President Ford has asked the Congress to increase the military budget from $84 billion allocated in 1974 to $95 billion for the 1975 fiscal year.

Approximately $23 million went for payments to MIA families in 1974, a Defense Department spokesman estimated. Each paycheck depends on the amount the missing man designated for his family in case he was killed in action or missing. The rest usually goes into a federal savings program; if the MIA comes home or is declared dead, the family receives the savings.

Most MIAs have been promoted in rank since they were reported missing. In the military, like many private firms, men draw higher salaries as their tenure increases. The MIA families receive the increases.

The promotions depend on tenure and rank. A full colonel is the highest rank to which an MIA has been promoted, Robson said.

Title 37 of the U.S. Code allows the secretary of each military branch to increase an individual family's allotment with the changing economy, if he sees fit. The accompanying chart shows an average pay scale for an officer with 10 years of service.

For the 28 Tar Heel MIAs, the least possible amount of annual support to the families would be $280,000. It is certain that that figure is an understatement, for it is derived from basic pay for the lowest rank and ignores food and other allowances.

In addition to basic monthly pay, each MIA family receives a monthly basic allowance for food and housing. The amount depends on the man's rank and the number of dependents. For example, an officer 3 with dependents receives $206.40 per month for housing. All officers receive $50.52 per month for food. So an officer 3's family receives $606.24 for food plus $2,476.80 for housing, annually. Hostile fire pay, flight pay and hazardous duty pay are also given to the families, if the man was receiving the money when he was declared missing.

BASIC MONTHLY PAY EFFECTIVE OCT. 1, 1974
OFFICERS WITH 10 YEARS OF SERVICE

The first ranking in each pair is a Navy officer; the second is the Army or Air Force equivalent.

	Month	Year
Captain Colonel	$1,565.70	$18,788.40
Commander Lieutenant Colonel	1,384.20	16,610.40
Lieutenant Commander Major	1,330.50	15,966.00
Lieutenant Captain	1,267.50	15,210.00
Lieutenant Junior Grade First Lieutenant	1,011.60	12,139.20
Ensign Second Lieutenant	798.30	9,579.60

Mr. and Mrs. Fintress Johnson of Rocky Mount with daughter, Caroline, and son, Darrell. The picture was taken the day before Darrell, then 21, left for Vietnam. He has been missing in action since 1968.